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# The Library in the Mountains and the Writing on the Wall : Fragmented Memories and Cultural Amnesia in Ursula K. Le Guin

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## Abstract

Memory, especially its loss, plays a prominent role in the work of Ursula K. Le Guin (b. 1929). *The Telling* (2000) and *Voices* (2006), two of Le Guin's most recent works, go into great detail on what happens when a memory is lost or destroyed, usually under duress. The former, the last book in Le Guin's Hainish cycle, deals with a goal to preserve books and learning from a regime that has made it a misguided goal to eradicate all elements of past culture in an effort to modernize the country. In the latter, part of Le Guin's *Annals of the Western Shore* series, the city of Ansul loses nearly all of its books when the Alds, a people that fears and/or despises written words, overtake the city and order the destruction of books and libraries, deeming them to be a sacrilege and a threat.

The destruction of cultural memories in Le Guin's books may be likened to trauma, in that it leads to the separation of people from each other and from their memories of the past, and it leaves a society without roots or resources to draw upon. Le Guin especially uses the motifs of the anthropologist-hero, the secret library and the preservation of books to demonstrate what happens to a society when it is forced to erase its memories. She also delves into the subject of what must be done to preserve those memories, as well as the debate over when it is better to remember and when to forget. This subject is especially critical when it comes to the subject of reconciliation: when bad events in the past should be remembered, and when they should be forgotten or forgiven. We see this topic especially at the end of both books, when the respective characters are trying to determine how to come to terms with past events.

This essay examines the use of memory in Le Guin's works of fiction and her nonfiction essays, and how they fit into the subject of memory's loss and redemption in dystopian science fiction in general. The essay also examines real-life incidents in history that bear similarities to

the events in her work, such as the destruction of Bosnia's national library, the Cultural Revolution in China and the recent war in Iraq.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

The Library in the Mountains and the Writing on the Wall: Fragmented Memories and Cultural  
Amnesia in

Ursula K. Le Guin

by

ERIN MICHELLE ROLL

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THE LIBRARY IN THE MOUNTAINS AND THE WRITING ON THE WALL:  
FRAGMENTED MEMORIES AND CULTURAL AMNESIA IN URSULA K. LE GUIN

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During a crucial scene in *The Telling* (2000), by Ursula K. Le Guin (b. 1929), Sutti, the “scientific observer,” shares an old Hainish parable with Yara the Monitor. “If the glass is whole, it reflects the whole world, but broken, it shows only fragments, and cuts the hand that holds it” (245). At their core, *The Telling* and *Voices* (2006) are stories of pieces being put back together, the broken being mended, of the buried being unearthed. In much of Le Guin’s work, memory is the thing broken and mended, buried and unearthed. It is something to be treasured, something that holds a person and a society together, but it is also something to be feared a little bit as well. But the greater fear is what would happen if those memories were lost or destroyed: what it would mean for the generation forced to forget, and the subsequent generations that do not realize that they have something to remember.

*The Telling* and *Voices*, two of Le Guin’s most recent works, go into great detail on what happens when a memory is lost or destroyed, usually under duress. The former, the last book in Le Guin’s Hainish cycle, deals with a goal to preserve books and learning from a regime that has made it a misguided goal to eradicate all elements of past culture in an effort to modernize the country. In the latter, part of Le Guin’s *Annals of the Western Shore series*, the city of Ansul loses nearly all of its books when the Alds, a people that fears and/or despises written words, overtake the city and order the destruction of books and libraries, deeming them to be a sacrilege and a threat. The books drive home the message that memory is a fragile and ephemeral thing, something that can be easily lost, often permanently. Indeed, as the parable of the mirror suggests, a memory itself may in fact be just that: a fragment of a larger whole.

I suggest that in Le Guin’s fiction, the loss of memory, something that might be construed as the result of trauma, is also a trauma unto itself. It is both a psychological and cultural trauma, not just to the individual, but to the larger group and the community. It separates

people from their pasts, their identities and their sense of agency, and it isolates and creates divisions among larger groups of people, separating them from each other: community from community, generation from generation. To put it another way, it is both the instrument and the result of individual and cultural trauma. In the forgetting, both that which is forced and that which occurs naturally over time, Le Guin's work shows that the society is weakened and rendered rootless, without a knowledge of history to draw upon.

In this essay, I examine Le Guin's treatment of cultural and individual memories as presented in each of the two books, supplemented by some discussion of how her prior works presented the concept of memory during tumultuous times. With that, I shall explore and respond to critical readings from different scholars, both on Le Guin's work and on dystopian science fiction in general. Through this, I hope to discuss how Le Guin's depiction of memory loss may fit into the larger discussion of memory loss during times of conflict, as well as how the books may be used as part of the larger discussion of collective memory and the process of remembering and forgetting.

Le Guin uses a number of distinct themes and images in both of these books in her depiction of memory. One is her frequent use of the anthropologist-type hero: the traveling storyteller, such as Gry and Orrec, the observer, such as Sutti, and so forth. This is a person whose business or calling it is to gather fragments of memories and help try to piece them back together. Furthermore, Le Guin uses books and writing as the most prominent physical symbols of memories, and the first act by a dominating regime is to try to destroy any and all books and writing that they deem to be a threat; the book-filled caves in the Lap of Silong and the secret library at the Oracle House are the largest remaining repositories of memory that remain after the Akan Corporation and the Aids have tried to wipe away all traces of the past culture. They are



symbols of memories locked inside a larger amnesiac mind, injured by the physical blows of armed conflict and cultural purges, it is true, but they are also the means to revive the old culture of the Telling and the old ways of Ansul.

In order to re-assemble these pieces of broken memory, Sutti, Memer and the other principal characters have to do more than find and preserve lost books. They must go back into their own memories, a journey that can be the source of much pain and anxiety. We also have to consider the protean nature of memory, in that one person may remember differently from another person. To add another layer to the conversation, Le Guin doesn't guarantee that the process of mending will ever be fully completed. She also presents us with the question of when it is better to try to revive old memories, or let things be. This debate over what should be remembered or forgotten will feed into the moments of reconciliation (or at least the attempts at reconciliation) at the end of each book, particularly in *The Telling*.

Admittedly, the events in Le Guin's books are fictional events, but it is a topic of interest to discuss how they would fit into a discussion of real-life cultural amnesia and trauma. On the individual level as well as the cultural level, forcing someone to forget or making something be forgotten is a powerful tool. Judith Herman, a scholar on the subject of mental trauma, refers to this in her book *Trauma and Recovery*: "In order to escape accountability for his crimes, the perpetrator does everything in his power to promote forgetting. Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator's first line of defense. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of the victim. If he cannot silence her completely, he tries to make sure that no one listens" (8). As can be seen in Le Guin's books, this happens on the institutional and societal level as well as the individual level. There is, however, the question of whether to address it as a psychological issue, or a sociological issue, or some aspect of both fields. Regarding the psychological aspects

of memory, it is notable that many studies of trauma – and indeed, a study of memories in Le Guin’s works may be counted as a trauma study, in a way – have historically relied on a decidedly Freudian model, though in recent years, this particular model has come in for criticism. A number of scholars of Le Guin rely on a more Jungian model, or at least Jungian-influenced. For example, the journey into memory might be considered a homecoming in Le Guin’s books, as Mike Cadden suggests in his writings on time and memory in Le Guin: “In the chronotope of dreams and memory one ‘awakens’ to a better place – or rather, a better self in more than one place. In the dream journey chronotope, the character crosses a threshold as well, but one can cross back to a purposeful and redefined self in the original place” (56).

There is definitely trauma present in Le Guin’s work, but her work generally does not discuss it with the language of the subconscious, the therapist or the Freudian scholar. Rather, Le Guin’s work looks at the loss of memories, the loss of culture and other moments of pain through the lens of the larger group or society: how both the individual and the culture are injured during times of pain and conflict, and how the healing of the person is connected to the healing of the larger group. It is not difficult to see her works as trying to teach the reader a lesson on the importance of memory, even though Le Guin has stated that this was not her conscious intention: “I write from passion and playfulness. My stories are neither dire warnings nor blueprints for what we ought to do. Most of them, I think, are comedies of human manners, reminders of the infinite variety of ways in which we always come back to the same place, and celebrations of that infinite variety by the invention of still more alternatives and possibilities” (“War” 218).

In Le Guin’s work in general, memory depends a great deal on bonds between the generations, with one being able to pass knowledge and wisdom from the past down to the next. Susan Bernardo and Graham Murphy identify this as an important theme fairly early on in Le

Guin's work: "Memory is particularly important in *Planet of Exile*, as the Alterrans have lost the historical thread of their heritage; the passing of one generation to the next has caused a cultural forgetting that forces the Alterrans to rely on incomplete cultural artifacts in order to piece together their precolonial life" (18). This is a trend that certainly continues in *Voices* and *The Telling*; the older generations die out and new ones take their place, the knowledge and skills that the older generations held slowly die with them. Indeed, it comes to the point where the pictograms on the apothecary's wall are no longer deemed a threat by the Akan Corporation simply because very few people can now read them. "But to so many they aren't words, only old scratches. So the police leave them alone...in my mother's time, all children could read. They could begin to read the story. The telling never stopped. In the forests and the mountains, in the villages and the cities, they were telling the story, telling it aloud, reading it aloud" (*Telling* 97). Obviously, Le Guin has the author's love and sympathy for the written and spoken word, and we may surmise that this has played an important part in elevating the role of writing and storytelling in her fiction. But we may infer that the loss of memories in the form of words is especially traumatic because it represents the loss of a voice, the ability to speak. And we may surmise that the ability to speak, verbally or through the written word, may be connected quite closely to the loss of the voice in traumatic incidents. As Sandra Lindlow states in her book *Dancing the Tao*, "Grief in itself can seem like a 'silent enormity,' a heavy weight that must be borne in silence. Suttu must carry the weight of her grief while facing the massive intellectual devastation of a cultural revolution" (Lindlow 159). The recapturing of memories in both books, and passing those memories along, depends a great deal on the telling of stories and the sharing of knowledge. Storytelling is a cherished ritual in both *Voices* and *The Telling*, and depending on the circumstances, it may be a ritual that must be performed in secret, out of sight of the current

regime. There are repositories of books and learning materials that are safeguarded from destruction. Le Guin takes it one step further and offers hints that the words and the books themselves are living creatures: the pictograms on the apothecary wall in *The Telling* almost seem to be alive to Suttty's eyes, while some of the books in the Oracle House in *Voices* seem to take on a life of their own.

Le Guin comes from a family of anthropologists, so it is not surprising that many of her characters would be interested in the study of a people, a place and a past. As Elizabeth Cummins writes in *Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin*, "This diversity of worlds Le Guin explores in her fiction was perhaps engendered by her own experiences as the child of Alfred and Theodora Kroeber. Not only did she live in homes of contrasting environments...she also experienced her parents' interest in studying different cultures" (1). Additionally, the Kroebers regularly received scholars of many varieties and academic disciplines at their homes: "To both homes came visitors – anthropologists as famous as Le Guin's father, graduate students, Native Americans – speaking German, English or one of several Indian languages" (2-3). This description may well have inspired Memer's description in *Voices* of how scholars, students and important people of Ansul regularly came to the Oracle House to have consultations with the Waylord. Besides her family upbringing, it is also possible to see roots of Le Guin's work in her fond memories of visiting libraries while growing up: "A library is a focal point, a sacred place to a community; and its sacredness is its accessibility, its publicness. It's everybody's place. I remember certain places, vividly and joyfully, as my library – elements of the best of my life" ("My Libraries" 20). It is therefore not surprising that she would therefore cast libraries as repositories of memory, and therefore repositories of hope, in many of her books.

Besides Le Guin's upbringing, Le Guin has a deep, long-running interest in Taoism, and it is possible to see how this has influenced her depiction of memory as well. Lindlow's study of the Taoist influences in Le Guin's writing places a particular emphasis on themes such as spiritual and intellectual growth, interconnectedness and balance, which we may see as being connected to memory. In *The Word For World Is Forest*, for example, Lindlow says, "The Athshean word for 'dream' also means 'root.' For this utopian, tree-living and tree-loving culture, the connection is significant. The roots of Selver's dreaming create an interconnected web for all Athsheans. Roots are symbolically meaningful throughout Le Guin's work...they represent stability, family connection, and peace" (177). And certainly, we do see roots represented in *The Telling* where memory is concerned, especially through the apothecary shop and the rituals of storytelling.

Besides Le Guin's own background and beliefs, there are world history and current events to be considered. For the reader of Le Guin's work in 2017, the books will likely bring reminders of current events in the news, of the destruction of monuments in Syria and Afghanistan by the Taliban and by Daesh, the self-proclaimed Islamic State. The preservation of libraries and their contents from destruction during war, a recurring image of has also been in the news of late; in 2016, a secret library – containing a range of books from Shakespeare and Arab poetry and plays to medical and dental texts – in the suburbs of Damascus was the focus of a report by the BBC. As one scholar using the library said: "In a sense the library gave me back my life. It's helped me to meet others more mature than me, people who I can discuss issues with and learn things from. I would say that just like the body needs food, the soul needs books" (Thomson n.p.).

In 1992, the Bosnian National and University Library was destroyed during the siege of Sarajevo; it was one of many places of learning and culture targeted and destroyed, and thousands of books and cultural artifacts were lost. As Matthew Battles describes in his book *Libraries: An Unquiet History*, “‘Throughout Bosnia,’ [Andras Niedlmayer, librarian] has written, ‘libraries, archives, museums and cultural institutions have been targeted for destruction, in an attempt to eliminate the material evidence – books, documents and works of art – that could remind future generations that people of different ethnic and religious traditions once shared a common heritage’” (188). It is not difficult to see in this a parallel between the destruction of Bosnia’s libraries by nationalist forces and the actions taken by the Alds and the Unists. It is not difficult to imagine a real-life Sulter Galva, or Sutti, or Tong Ov, hearing the news of the destroyed books and mourning them. In the years since the conflict in Bosnia, an effort has begun to try to collect and document surviving books from the libraries, and duplicates of those books that were lost (190). A similar effort in Timbuktu to preserve ancient and medieval manuscripts from Al-Qaeda in the 2000s was the focus of Joshua Hammer’s 2016 book *The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu*.

Certainly, it is possible to go on in length about the real-life destruction of memories that bears similarities to the events in Le Guin’s books. It is plain to see that the situations that Le Guin depicts in *Voices* and *The Telling* are certainly not without historical precedence, as these incidents clearly indicate. *The Telling* has been routinely described as having been inspired in part by the Cultural Revolution in China in the 1960s and 1970s (“Memory” 114), and the fate of Taoism during that time especially resonated with Le Guin in the writing of *The Telling*: “I was shocked to find that a 2,500-year-old body of thought, of ritual, of art could be, had been

essentially destroyed during my adult lifetime. The atrocity, and my long ignorance of it, haunted me. I had to write about it, in my own sidelong fashion” (Gevers n.p.).

As for *Voices*, the reader seems to have been left to guess which particular historical events Le Guin may have based the novel on. However, Le Guin was particularly struck by a photograph taken during the early days of the U.S.-led war in Iraq, of a man running away from a burning library with his arms full of books: “The books – some of them large and heavy – may have been rare treasures, or they may have been whatever he could gather up in the confusion of the burning building. He may have been a librarian, or he may have been only a reader. I know he was not a looter, because his face showed not only distress and fear, but passionate grief” (“Geraldine Brooks” 212). It is easy to see how this scene may well have inspired *Voices*, which was released about three years after the start of the war in Iraq.

In both books, the place of memories, wherever its location is, appears to be a primal place, a place of origins. To enter them is a ritual activity, very much like entering into a temple or other sacred place. On a more primal level, the Lap of Silong and the library at the Oracle House are dark, hidden spaces, almost womb-like. It is as if to return to them is a kind of rebirthing process, and we may suggest that to return to this primal place of memories is to be reborn in a way. And yet the visits to these places are somehow terrifying as well; Memer’s routine visits to the hidden library at the back of the Oracle House, while they are a time of solace and refuge for her, have the effect of awakening memories that frighten or trouble her, while Suttu’s months-long trek to find the Lap of Silong is a perilous journey, and the first entrance into Silong is a descent into shadows.

Besides an examination of memory in *Voices* and *The Telling*, it is important to look at the portrayal of memory in Le Guin’s earlier work, for what has been written in the earlier books

of the Hainish Cycle can be seen later on in both books. Already, we can see the first vestiges of a concern about the process of forgetting and isolation, and old knowledge being lost. Consider these words from the prologue of *Rocannon's World* (1966): “How can you tell the legend from the fact on these worlds that lie so many years away? Planets without names, called by their people simply The World, planets without history, where the past is the matter of myth, and a returning explorer finds his own doings of a few years back have become the gestures of a god. Unreason darkens that gap of time bridged by our lightspeed ships, and in the darkness uncertainty and disproportion grow like weeds” (*Rocannon* 3).

As previously mentioned, Bernardo and Murphy have seen an important role regarding the thread of historical memory in *Planet of Exile*. And indeed, we may see the first hints here of isolation and forgetting. The Records Room and the ticking clocks are vestiges of the now-severed links between the worlds, of this world where the story takes place and the far-off planets of the Ekumen. There is an ominous hint, however, of how fragile that remaining knowledge truly is: “For not all wisdom was truly contained in the League Books, and from day to day and Year to Year a little knowledge would be lost, supplanted by some more immediately useful bit of information concerning daily existence here and now. And in the end, they could not even understand much of what the books told them” (*Planet* 138). However, of Le Guin’s work, I suggest that one of the most prominent precursors to *Voices* and *The Telling* would be *City of Illusions* (1967), another one of the Hainish novels. Falk, yet another anthropological diplomat hero, leads a mission back to Terra, only to have his memory completely erased by the Shing, a people that has already taken over the planet and destroyed much of the culture on it. So once again, we have broken memories that must be forged back together, not just in the head but in the larger group: “As part of that process, [Falk] forms ties with his benefactors, notably Parth and



Ramarren, and must negotiate a rural landscape defined by fragmentation and alienation, key elements found both in *Rocannon's World* and *Planet of Exile*" (Bernardo and Murphy 18). So again, we have a mention of not just the breaking apart, but also the separating. Falk is physically and mentally separated from his team after his memories are destroyed, and Terra is separated from the rest of the universe through the actions of the Shing. The book follows Falk's efforts to reconnect with his past and his memories, and in the process to renew the link between Terra and the other Hainish planets. Interestingly enough, the book suggests that the Shing, though what they did appears to be an act of evil, are perhaps not evil themselves: "Did they in truth lie? Perhaps that was not quite the way of it; perhaps the essence of their lying was a profound, irremediable lack of understanding. They could not get in touch with men. They had used that and profited by it, making it into a great weapon, the mind-lie; but had it been worth their while after all?" (*City* 368). The conclusion, with Falk departing Earth, hints at the move toward reconciliation and rediscovery of memories, through storytelling, that will come in *The Telling* and *Voices*: "'He can tell Werel his tale about Earth, and you can tell yours, and I mine...There's always more than one way towards the truth'" (369). All of these people and places, the forebears of Sutti, Memer, Ansul and Aka, reiterate Le Guin's focus on memory's role as the bond between people and groups of people. Obviously, a people's relationship with memory and the past is a complicated one. In Le Guin's work, it would very much seem that to lose these memories and these bonds would have disastrous effects.

Because memories, both the memories themselves and the physical representations of them, such as books, libraries and artifacts, are so powerful, there is also an element of fear associated with them. Just as this is the case in many of Le Guin's books, so it is also the case in many works of dystopian science fiction and fantasy: a subject that Raffaella Baccolini and other

critics have explored in the volume *Dark Horizons*. A regime's erasure of memory is, of course, closely connected to power. By wiping out a previous culture and enforcing its own dicta on what may be said and what may be thought, Baccolini says, a regime or a corporation tries to ensure that the populace will not rise up and rebel: "Memory and the past are such important parts of dystopia because, to paraphrase Antonio Gramsci, the conditions of the dystopian citizens are not so different from those of a prisoner, who, having no control over space nor over the present and the future, can reside only in the past" ("Memory and Historical Reconciliation" 125). The concept of power is also essential to the often complex motives that have driven the destruction of books and libraries in real life. Battles indicates that there have been numerous motives for the destruction of books over the course of history. One variety, he says, is an attempt to revise a book, such as a holy text that contains information now deemed to be incorrect. "Or, books may be burned to erase their authors and readers from history, as the conquest of Mexico shows" (42). We may recognize some of these motives in *The Telling* and *Voices*, to a certain extent: the erasure, certainly, but also the idea of revising a history or a text and deciding which version is "correct." To return to the subject of dystopian fiction, Baccolini argues that the use of memory plays an important part in distinguishing Le Guin's work from older dystopian fiction such as George Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*; Orwell's novel ends with Winston and Julia being overcome once again by the Party's apparatus, but Le Guin's heroes and heroines are able to use memory as a way to regain some of their agency ("Persistence" 520). In other circumstances, we might have seen Le Guin's characters dreaming wistfully of the past in an attempt to mentally escape from a dreary present; some characters, such as Memer's godmother Ista, do just this, thinking longingly of the days when Ansul was a renowned seat of learning and the Waylord's house regularly received prominent scholars and guests. And this is

one of the most important reasons why the passage of memories from one generation to another is crucial to Le Guin's work. If the thread is cut, if the memories die with one generation, then the next generation will not have any memories to remember, and therefore no reason to rebel. Or, as Le Guin herself says: "We will not know our own injustice if we cannot imagine justice. We will not be free if we cannot imagine freedom. We cannot demand that anyone try to attain justice and freedom who has not had a chance to imagine them as attainable" ("War" 220). And this is the role that memory plays: it gives the protagonist the chance to imagine something better, and something to hope for, even if the remembering process is painful and difficult.

Much of what is demonstrated in Le Guin's books would likely fall under the category of what Paul Connerton terms repressive forgetting. "Forgetting as repressive erasure appears in its most brutal form, of course, in the history of totalitarian regimes, whereas in Milan Kundera's often quoted words, 'the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting'" ("Seven" 60). Le Guin herself has referred to Kundera's words in interviews as well: "To remember, if my Latin is correct, actually means to put the parts together. So that implies that there are ways of losing parts. Kundera talks about this aspect of storytelling, too. In fact, he says that history, which is another kind of story, is often deliberately falsified in order to make a people forget who they are or who they were. He calls that 'the method of organized' forgetting" (White n.p.). There have been moments in history, Connerton suggests, when a brutality has been so savage that the people who have experienced it are unable to speak of it, thereby ensuring that their descendants will not be able to speak of it. "We cannot, of course, infer the act of forgetting from the act of silence" (68). This is a line that the people of Okzat-Ozkat and Ansul might be able to agree with; their apparent silence on the public streets is a matter of safety, while inwardly they are in rebellion. On the individual level, we may infer that Sutti, Yara, Memer and

the Waylord have had the same difficulty, in not being able to speak of their respective pasts or come to terms with what has happened to them, or at least not immediately.

Conversely, are there moments in Le Guin's books where the forgetting might be preferable? Connerton also mentions prescriptive forgetting, something that may be necessary in the process of reconciliation: "[The ancient Greeks] were acutely aware of the dangers intrinsic to remembering past wrongs because they knew the endless chains of vendetta revenge to which this so often led" (61). To apply Connerton's reasoning to Le Guin's work, and to certain other historical events, is a complicated business. On one hand, one might say that the people of Ansul and the Aids may have to forget some things in order to start healing the wounds of the past. However, it is debatable whether this is truly forgetting, or simply accepting the fact that events have happened, and it is time to move on from them.

*The Telling* opens with Sutti returning to her memories of the past in her sleep, setting the stage for the book's focus on memories and the past. "When Sutti went back to Earth in the daytime, it was always to the village. At night, it was the Pale" (1). This is the reader's first hint that Sutti is carrying a heavy burden of pain and memories, compounded by what she has to see in her work as a scientific observer with the Ekumen. "A scene would begin to happen, not in sweet, bright bits but in full recall of a place and a length of time; and once the memory began, she could not stop it. She had to go through it until it let her go" (2).

As indicated earlier in this essay, the protagonist is often an anthropologist figure, the gatherer of memories. Sutti, an observer for the Ekumen council, is sent to Aka to help recover knowledge of that planet's former culture. Aka, in its race to be counted among the technologically-advanced planets of the Ekumen, has embarked on a wholesale destruction of its past culture. The Corporation, the ruling regime, has ordered the destruction of libraries, temples

and other places of learning over the past fifty years. Anyone who is found to be in possession of old texts or artifacts, or who is caught teaching old knowledge, is sent for reeducation if they are fortunate, or executed if they are not. The Akan quest to stamp out what it perceives to be old and dangerous knowledge is also connected to a similar campaign of erasure taking place on Terra (Earth). During Sutti's lifetime, the systems of government in North America had been replaced by a rigid theocracy subject to a religion known as Unism. We do not learn all of the tenets of Unism, but we do know that is a radically conservative, fundamentalist religion with an evangelical bent. Furthermore, its faith leaders view all books and printed matter other than the Unism holy books to be a sacrilege to be destroyed. Consider this apocalyptic moment of the destruction of libraries: "In late March, a squadron of planes from the Host of God flew from Colorado to the District of Washington and bombed the library there, plane after plane, four hours of bombing that turned centuries of history and millions of books into dirt" (4). There are many traumas in Sutti's past, but to watch the Library of Congress be destroyed in a matter of moments is a particularly painful one. "Thus, the warfare taking place on Terra and Aka are as much physical assaults as psychic assaults because the destruction of memory erodes the cultural, spiritual, and communal anchors of social identity" (Bernardo and Murphy 84-5).

Sutti finds much of what she seeks, both as an observer and as a person trying to make sense of a traumatized life, in the backwater village of Okzat-Ozkat, where an attentive person may find remnants of Aka's past that have escaped the Corporation authorities. One of the most important rituals in Okzat-Ozkat is the ritual of the Telling, in which members of the community gather in secret to listen to the *yaz*, the learned people. The ritual could involve any number of things, from storytelling, to guided meditation, to the sharing of songs and poetry. These

moments are ones that reinforce the values of passing down knowledge from one generation to the next, and reinforcing the bonds between members of the community.

As Suttu travels through Okzat-Ozkat, the reader is given many more reminders of how language and writing are highly regulated under the regime of the Corporation. There is one such ministry dedicated exclusively to the production of approved writing, and the Monitor in his blue-and-tan uniform, works for this ministry. “Poets wore blue and tan – official poets, at any rate – and producers of tapes and neareals, and librarians, and bureaucrats in branches of the bureau with which Suttu was less familiar, such as Ethical Purity” (40). It is clear that any mention of written words is highly regulated on Aka, for the benefit of the Corporation and for the elimination of unapproved ideologies.

The events of *The Telling* reach a critical point when the Monitor, in a not-entirely-sanctioned effort to follow Suttu to the Lap of Silong and then to have the books there destroyed, crashes into the side of the mountain. Suttu refuses to see him at first, seeing him only as an enemy and a destroyer. However, the two gradually begin speaking of their respective pasts when Suttu finally comes to visit Yara in the tent where he is recovering. Quite notably, Yara is found clutching a children’s book from the era of the old Telling. Like Suttu, he too has to revisit his broken past. It is as if he is reverting to a childlike state before the events that led to the execution of his grandparents and his indoctrination as a good servant of the Corporation. The moment where Suttu and Yara begin speaking of their respective pasts is a crucial one: “By sharing her trauma with Yara, Suttu begins to heal. As survivors, Suttu and Yara reach a special intimacy” (Lindlow 166).

Like *The Telling*, *Voices* starts with a memory, a primal one: “The first thing I can remember clearly is writing the way into the secret room” (1), Memer recalls at the opening of

the first chapter. As with Sutti, she is thinking back to an earlier time in her life, a pivotal moment. “The memory isn’t of one time I went in, but many” (2), she later clarifies. It is going back to a time that is both a place of refuge and a place of pain. She reveals that it is where, as a small child, she hid with her mother while the city was under siege.

Much of the plotline in *Voices*, the second volume of the *Annals of the Western Shore* series, deals with the struggle to preserve memories – in the form of cultural heritage and patrimony – from destruction by a repressive regime. But much of the story also involves the memories of one individual person. The focus is not so much on individual amnesia, such as it would be in *City of Illusions*, but instead the book draws into the larger narrative of what happens when the larger group is forced to forget things: “A lot can be lost in seventeen years. A generation learns that knowledge is punished and safety lies in ignorance. The next generation doesn’t know they’re ignorant, because they don’t know what knowledge was” (76).

As the story opens, the reader learns that Ansul, a city once renowned for its libraries and centers of learning, has been overrun by the Alds, a people that distrusts any sort of written word outside of its own holy books, and orders the total destruction of Ansul’s libraries and schools. This includes the act of throwing any books – an object that the Alds deem to be a symbol of demonic activity - that can be found into the waterways to sink, and often throwing people of the city in to sink with them. As in *The Telling*, the few remaining books are secreted primarily in one particular place: inside the grand house of Galvamand, a house that has a reputation among Ansul’s community as the Oracle House. This place is Memer’s ancestral home, and the surviving members of her family live here with her.

*Annals of the Western Shore* is a fantasy series, somewhat in the same vein as Le Guin’s Earthsea series. It is possible that some might question whether *Voices* is a work of dystopian

fiction, in the same vein that we might expect from *The Telling*, or from non-Le Guin works such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Fahrenheit 451*. In those situations, the unease comes from the reader seeing what has become of a world that they recognize. But to counter that, *Voices* is a world that appears to have background in the real world; it is possible to see the events of *Voices* as being rooted in real-life historical events. And the book forces the reader, in its own way, to ask, what if this happened here. Furthermore, it is noted that the most notable works of dystopian fiction are often (but not always) works of “hard” science fiction, while *Voices*, as noted, is classified as a fantasy.

Stylistic differences aside, *Voices* follows much of the same approach as *The Telling*. There is a civilization that, for whatever reason, has seen a lot of its knowledge of the past discarded. The key difference, however, is that Aka has thrown out the past of its own free will, while Ansul is made to destroy its books and libraries at the bidding of the Alds, an outside force. As in *The Telling*, we have several people who act as collectors of old knowledge; the home of Memer’s family becomes a repository for people to bring their books for safekeeping from the Alds. Gry and Orrec, the traveling storytellers from the Uplands, are perhaps the equivalent to Suttu and the Ekumen in *The Telling*; their presence is tolerated and respected, to an extent, by the Ald regime, much as Suttu’s presence is tolerated by the Akan regime.

We do not know where *Voices*, and the other books of *Annals of the Western Shore*, take place in relationship to our time, or our universe, whether it is in the distant past or in a distant future that has reverted to old ways. A 2008 review of the book in *Kirkus* indicates that the reader will find parallels between the book’s events and real-life current events, but it doesn’t specify what those exact events might be (*Voices* review n.p.).



It is significant that *Voices* is told through the first-person view of Memer, in contrast to the third-person accounting of the grownup Sutti in *The Telling*, because we are seeing all of the events of the story as told through Memer's eyes and world experience. This in turn speaks to the often protean nature of memory, and affects how the reader will see the events of the book; Memer hates the Alds and vows never to have anything to do with them, but starts to have a change of tune with Gry and Orrec's eventual coaxing. Memer's accounting of the story is therefore only a small fragment of the larger story of Ansul and the Alds, like an artifact that is being used to tell the story of the entire civilization that it came from. And this, I suggest, feeds into the larger discussion of whether it is possible to assemble the past from the few fragments that are left, whether they are memories inside the head or physical monuments or artifacts.

The book's title, *Voices*, is highly significant, and Lindlow points to four varieties of voice: those of the writers who wrote the books now hidden in the library, that of the Oracle, the people of Ansul rising up against the Alds, and Memer herself discovering who she is as a person and as a scholar (192). This interpretation, I feel, fits in well with the concept of the regaining of the voice following a period of trauma. Lindlow argues, of Memer, "Her name suggests meme, a unit of cultural understanding that can be passed along from generation to generation. Protecting the memes of Ansul's cultural heritage is crucial because within this besieged city owning a book can be punishable by death" (190). Indeed, the reader may also infer that Memer's name, when whispered or mumbled, sounds like "memory" or part of "remember." And a name has an important role in Le Guin's fiction – as the rituals and rules of names in the Earthsea Cycle will demonstrate – so we may easily infer that Memer's name alone indicates that she has an important destiny in the life of Ansul. She is both memory and the one who remembers.

Memer's entrances into the hidden library at the Oracle House are some of the most important scenes in the book. It is clear to see that Memer fears the place as much as she treasures it, and that fear intensifies as she grows from childhood to adolescence. She wants to know what the oracle that makes its home in the library has to say, and yet at the same time, she fears it. "I had always been afraid of the far end of this long strange room stretching off into darkness. I had kept away from the shadow end, turned my back on it, not thought about it, told myself, 'That's something I'll understand later.' Now it was later. Now I had to understand what my house was built on" (86-7). Of this, we may say that Memer must understand the foundations of more than one house: that of her mind, and that of Ansul's culture, and this involves facing memories, or aspects of herself and Ansul, that she would rather avoid. Furthermore, the role of memories as foundations, as we might read them here, fits in well with the imagery of dreams and roots in *The Telling* and *The Word For World Is Forest*.

It is intriguing that the oracle in the library may give different answers to the same question, or that a book may give different answers on a different day. The Waylord tells Memer of books that have fixed, unchanging words and answers, and the more recent books that contain both questions and answers: "Often, both are obscure. But they repay study. And then, after they moved the library out of Galvamand, there were fewer questions. And the answers may change, or vanish, or appear with no question asked. Those are the books you cannot read twice, any more than you could drink the same water twice from the Oracle Spring" (170).

Most of what Memer knows of Ansul's former days she hears from her guardian, Sulter Galva, the Waylord, and the other adults in the house. Being a young person having no direct memories of Ansul's prior days, Memer and others of her generation are beholden to the adults in their lives for knowledge of the past. There is a duty here, Le Guin seems to be saying, of the

older generation to pass knowledge and wisdom down to the young. So as it was with *Planet of Exile* and with the rituals in *The Telling*. The Waylord tells Memer of both the good times and the bad, providing a shades-of-gray perception of the past that is in contrast to Memer's initially black-and-white worldview. By contrast, Ista appears to be motivated highly by nostalgia; she speaks frequently of better days when the family home was a house that routinely entertained prominent guests and speakers. But she seems to be somewhat suspicious of Memer being able to take time away from her chores to have reading and history lessons with Sulter Galva. We may ask, therefore, what role nostalgia plays in the role of remembering (or misremembering) history. The adults' stories, as engaging as they might be, are only a small piece of the history of Ansul and its taking. Aside from those books secreted away in the secret library, Memer has no history books to study from, no museums to visit. The reader does have to wonder how much knowledge of Ansul's past was lost when the Alds began destroying the city's libraries and schools, and we have to wonder what pieces of history are absent from the books that are in the secret room in Galvamand. As thorough as the preservation efforts by the people of Ansul might have been, we have to consider the real possibility that many pieces of Ansul's past may have been lost for good during the years of the city's siege.

There is an aspect of Memer's heritage that is a reminder that the uncovering and discussion of memories can be a painful one in Le Guin's work. Memer is revealed to be a "siege brat," conceived when an Ald soldier raped her mother. Le Guin, rather interestingly, does not go very deeply into the ramifications of Memer belonging to two different backgrounds, except to note how she has a foot in one world and a foot in another. There is another aspect to Memer's appearance: she is a living reminder of a traumatic act and a crime committed. To put it another way, she is a living monument of a rape. It is an act that has been brutally visited upon her

mother and upon numerous other women, as the presence of other “siege brats” indicates. The fact Memer and children like her have a rather pejorative name bestowed upon them by some of the populace indicates that this is something, not surprisingly, that Ansul does not remember fondly; rather, we may not be surprised if some people in Ansul would prefer that Memer and the other “siege brats” not exist. It seems that as with Sutti, Memer has to come to terms with her own heritage and inner thoughts, as she helps the Waylord, Gry and Orrec with the preservation of the books in the secret library. This includes coming to some understanding of the Alds, whom she had originally vowed to despise for the rest of her life.

As in *The Telling*, *Voices* has a communal ritual of storytelling. But in this setting, all of the people – ordinary people of Ansul as well as the Ald elite – gather in the public square to hear Orrec recount stories at the request of the Ald governor. This is a ritual that has the effect of bringing two different communities together, and it is not unreasonable to suspect that the storytelling rituals go a long way toward bringing about reconciliation between the Alds and Ansul, and regained rights for Ansul’s people. Gry and Orrec, as traveling storytellers, appear to occupy the anthropologist role in the story. Consider Orrec’s words: “Waylord, I work with what’s lost, buried, hidden. Lost by time and ill chance, or hidden from destruction, from the prejudice of a ruler or priest” (76).

*The Telling* seems to straddle a line between two different schools of thought: keep everything, and throw everything away. However, this concept would be better identified with the images of Sutti and Yara, and later Sutti and the Corporation, having their parley at the end of the book. The destruction of the Library of Congress by the Unists is definitely an act of repressive forgetting, a move to suppress free thought and speech in an effort to gain power and

subdue a citizenry. And as with the Corporation, the Unists likely hope that the library's value and its contents will be gradually forgotten with each passing generation.

In dystopian fiction, or at least among readers of dystopian fiction, there may be a perception that any and all erasure of past knowledge in the books is dangerous, and that there is a cautionary tale for the reader in this. Certainly, *The Telling* tries to show that the erasure of Aka's past is a dangerous move, a form of repression on the part of the Akan corporation. Paradoxically, however, Sutti's supervisor, the Ekumen representative Tong Ov, notes that there is something that Sutti and the Ekumen can learn from Aka: "Erasure is an art we must learn from the Akans. Seriously! I mean it. The Hainish want to hang on to everything. The Akans want to throw everything away. Maybe there's a middle way? At any rate, we have our first chance to get into an area where history wasn't erased so thoroughly" (*Telling* 25).

This is a moment that would seem to fit one of Connerton's seven types of forgetting: allowing the old and the outdated to make way for the new. Tong Ov actually mentions a middle path between preserving and tossing away. Sutti finds herself in a similar position when she reluctantly deletes a line of old Akan poetry from her electronic tablet for security purposes. "Although the music is precious, it makes sense to erase it because it is politically dangerous to keep it. Seen through a Taoist lens, 'not having' is superior to 'having. Following the way of the Tao is encumbered by too much 'having' (Lindlow 162). It is debatable whether a strictly Taoist interpretation may be applied to everything that we have seen in Le Guin's books, especially if we have discussed it in the context of ground-shaking historical events. However, it is possible to say that because memories and the things that represent them, especially books and writing, are so ephemeral and easily erased, it increases a society's determination to try to hold on to them as much as possible.

To return to the parable of the mirror, *Voices* and *The Telling* do show the gathering of shattered memories, an endeavor that is relatively successful in both books. But after the gathering of memories, there is still the question of whether those memories can be pieced back together, and indeed if they will still have the same shape or significance that they once did. Additionally, with memories comes the subject of reconciliation: will the Akan Corporation be convinced to allow the culture of the Telling to come back into existence, and can the people of Ansul convince the Alds to allow them some of their former rights back? This aspect of both books is considerably more complex than the action of simply collecting books and stories.

The prospect of a hopeful recovery is a little more pronounced in *Voices*. Like *The Telling*, *Voices* raises some serious questions about what must be done in times of historical reconciliation. As the book concludes, the book hints at a promise of a more egalitarian relationship between the Alds and the people of Ansul. But again, as is the custom in Le Guin's books, Le Guin leaves the door open for another story to follow. Even more significant, there is a scene in which the older generation is starting to teach the younger generation some things that had been forgotten: songs, festival dances, and so forth.

Yet there is a passage near the book's end in which Memer hints that the people of Ansul, as a result of their long occupation, are a little wary of the Oracle Cave: "That the Oracle spoke through books, people knew vaguely, and now they'd actually heard its voice; but they didn't ask to know more about the mystery, they didn't want to pry into it, they let it be" (320). If anything, this is the one thing that might cast a cloud over the regathering of memories in *Voices*. We don't know if the people of Ansul will be able to look at books the same way that they did before the Ald occupation. But as with Suttu's meeting with the Akan Corporation, Le Guin chooses to leave the continuation of that subject for another book.

Sutty has her doubts about what will happen in the efforts to regain knowledge of Aka's old culture, and whether it will truly be the same once the present-day historians and anthropologists try to reassemble it. Consider her description of the Unists' campaign against any literature and culture they deemed unholy: "They sabotaged the information storage networks and destroyed libraries and schools all over the world. They didn't destroy everything, of course. It can be pieced back together. But...damage was done. That kind of damage is something like a stroke. One recovers, almost. But you know all that" (215). Her comparison of the destruction of Aka's past to the physical memory loss from a stroke or other medical condition is an especially powerful one. Just as a person may lose memories from a traumatic incident, so too may a culture.

With the recovery of memory, Le Guin asks the reader to consider how a people must reconcile with painful events of the past, or to bring about reconciliation between two groups of people. In *Voices*, an armed rebellion by Ansul against the Alds ends badly, with some of the rebellion leaders being killed. It takes a careful series of negotiations with some of the Ald leadership, some of whom are quietly sympathetic to Ansul's culture, before the people of Ansul begin to regain some of the rights they had before the occupation.

What we see in Le Guin's books, I suggest, is an appeal not just to remember, but how best to remember; I further suggest that Le Guin advocates not clinging to every single scrap of memory like a prized but ragged toy, but rather preserving elements of the past so they can be examined critically and therefore used to plan for the future. To return to the metaphor of the shattered fragments of memory and history, there is the question of whether it is a good idea to try to reassemble that history, or whether to let the past stay the past. And if those fragments are gathered, there is also the question of whether they will be the same object that they once were.

Bernardo, Murphy and Lindlow all seem to indicate that memory in its various forms provides connectedness between people, groups of people and generations, providing the foundation for the society. Without memory, there is isolation and aimlessness. This too, I think, we can connect to the sense of identity. The process of remembering must be done also by perceived adversaries: the Akan Corporation must meet with Suttu, and the Aids must come to an agreement with Ansul.

The preservation and discussion of memory in Le Guin's books is a complex issue. Suttu, Memer, the Ekumen, Gry and Orrec are given the important, yet at the same time, emotionally difficult, task of gathering remnants of broken memories and gradually piecing them back together, whether that involves collecting lost books and stories, or trying to remember something that happened to them long ago and is still influencing their lives in the present day. There is no guarantee that the task will succeed, but it is this work, the re-gathering of memories, that leads to an understanding of the past, a hope for freedom and enlightenment in the future, and the hopeful mending of wounds, both mental and cultural. That which is broken may not look completely the same as it once did, but it is better to have attempted to regather the memories than to have not. It may be difficult to unearth memories, but Le Guin's work indicates that it is worse to leave them buried.



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